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**THE UNITED STATES SENATE  
Judiciary Committee**

**Public Hearing  
PROJECT SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS**

**Submitted by  
The Honorable Patrick L. Meehan  
United States Attorney  
Eastern District of Pennsylvania**

**May 13, 2003**

Good Morning. I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you about the successes we have had, and the challenges we still face, in fighting gun crime in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. In many ways, the nine-county district is a microcosm of America. The district is anchored in one corner by Philadelphia, our nation's fifth largest city. But between the quiet suburbs and rural farmland in the other 8 counties, there are other cities, small and medium, Allentown, and Reading, and Easton, that have suffered for years from the violence triggered by the illegal use of firearms. In my district last year, there was more than 1 murder a day, more than 3 rapes a day, more than 26 robberies and 33 aggravated assaults a day.

Before I became the U. S. Attorney in September of 2001, I was the district attorney in Delaware County, just south of Philadelphia. As a state prosecutor, I was heartened when President Bush targeted gun violence as a top domestic priority. As a new *federal* prosecutor, I was inspired when Congress supported that priority with the

impressive resources of Project Safe Neighborhoods. I reached out to the nine county district attorneys in my district and obtained commitments from each of them to be partners in an unprecedented district-wide effort to substantially reduce firearms violence.

Over the past 18 months, with my partners on board, my office has moved aggressively to implement Project Safe Neighborhoods by taking a number of critical actions.

First, we more than doubled the size of the Firearms Section in the U.S. Attorney's Office from 5 prosecutors to 12 full-time prosecutors.

Second, because of the PSN funding for state prosecutors, all nine county district attorneys immediately agreed to cross-designate at least one assistant district attorney to handle firearms cases in federal court as a special assistant United States attorney. Within months, each district attorney at least doubled the number of prosecutors assigned to the program. We have trained each of these state prosecutors in federal practice and provided them with senior federal prosecutors as mentors. Which

means that, in my district, we now have 40 prosecutors participating in Project Safe Neighborhoods.

Third, we established a PSN task force - with federal and state law enforcement, and community leaders - in each of the nine counties. Each task force has developed and implemented a strategic plan to target the most violent offenders and organizations in the particular county.

Fourth, working with the FBI and other agencies, we have established a Hobbs Act Armed Robbery Task Force. This task force, one of only a few of its kind in the country, focuses exclusively on those gangs that commit Hobbs Act -- or commercial - armed robberies.

Fifth, we are training local law enforcement officials in federal law and practice, and assisting them in refining police practice to strengthen the evidence in the gun cases brought into federal court.

Sixth, we have used a PSN grant of \$170,000 to get our message out. We have created a powerful videotape on our PSN efforts and used it to speak to community

groups, law enforcement organizations, even prison inmates.

Last year, my office indicted the greatest number of firearms cases – 230 – and the greatest number of defendants – 316 – in our office’s history. We are targeting the most violent criminals. Let me give you an example or two of the stories behind the numbers.

Ken Coffie’s criminal record of 10 prior convictions included 5 armed robberies and an armed carjacking. We convicted him of being an armed career criminal in possession of a gun and he is now serving a sentence of 19 years and 7 months.

Robert Baynard had a gun with him when he was stopped for DUI. Baynard had 26 prior convictions for burglary. He pled guilty in federal court to being an Armed Career Criminal in possession of a gun, and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Our task forces have focused not just on violent individuals like Coffie and Baynard, but even more importantly, on violent organizations and gangs that use firearms

to commit crimes. For example, in the past eight months, investigations by the Berks County Task Force have targeted two violent “crack” cocaine distribution organizations that have terrorized neighborhoods in the city of Reading. One of these organizations, involving 14 members, was operating close to an elementary school. So far, 21 members of the two organizations have been indicted, all but two are in custody, and 12 have pled guilty and face sentences of up to life in prison.

We have also charged six gangs, including 17 defendants, with committing 32 Hobbs Act armed robberies. In one case, United States v. Jeremy Fontanez, seven defendants were charged with committing 12 armed robberies across the length of the district, in Montgomery, Lehigh, Bucks, Delaware, and Philadelphia Counties. Based on further investigation, the Lehigh County District Attorney’s Office has also now charged four of these defendants with committing a thirteenth armed robbery of a bar in Allentown, during which Fontanez murdered a patron and critically wounded another. Upon conviction, Fontanez faces a mandatory life sentence in federal court and the

possibility of the death penalty in state court. This case illustrates another huge benefit of the PSN program - in investigating and prosecuting these cases, we have obtained the intelligence needed to solve several unsolved murders.

I do want to use this occasion to say that, although we can always use additional resources, we have been quite pleased with the level of support that Congress has provided for all aspects of the PSN initiative -- most importantly, for the state prosecutors cross-designated as federal prosecutors, but also for the grants for community outreach, task forces, training, and media coverage. Similarly, we have found that the existing federal laws on gun crimes -- particularly the statutes on felons in possession and armed career criminals -- provide us with powerful tools for fighting gun crime.

There is one area though -- gun trafficking and straw purchasing -- in which the statutes and sentencing guidelines do not seem to provide for sufficiently severe penalties for us to do as much as we could to stop those dangerous crimes. We have aggressively targeted gun traffickers and straw purchasers in my district. Since I became

the U. S. Attorney, my office has charged 12 defendants with illegally trafficking in firearms and 61 defendants with straw purchasing firearms. For example, we obtained a guilty plea from a David Faruqui to a 21-count indictment charging him with dealing in firearms without a license and providing false information to a federal firearms licensee. One of the guns purchased by Faruqui has been linked through ballistics analysis to the notorious Lex Street murders, the largest mass murder in Philadelphia history, where seven people were murdered and three more were wounded. Yet Faruqui was sentenced in federal court to just three years incarceration.

In this and other cases, we have been able to put the traffickers in prison. But the law does not provide sufficiently tough penalties for firearms traffickers who illegally sell guns, often to violent criminals. Similarly, the sentencing guidelines provide for relatively minor penalties for straw purchasers and even for those gun traffickers who sell a hundred or more guns illegally. Increasing the penalties for illegal firearms trafficking, would give us another tool for fighting gun crime.

The PSN partnership between federal and local law enforcement has made a real difference in my district. For example, last year, in Philadelphia, there was an 11% drop in gunpoint robberies. Numbers like that are more than mere coincidence.

Defendants and defense attorneys have certainly recognized the power of the program. They practically beg not to be charged federally. Two weeks ago, a Reading newspaper ran a series of stories on the effectiveness of Project Safe Neighborhoods. One article started, “A defense attorney’s worst nightmare might involve the federal government taking over the prosecution of a case.” A defense attorney was quoted saying that, “The penalties are a lot more drastic in federal court. If you get someone on possession of a gun they could get 15 years. That can be more time than some homicide cases in county court.”

I want to conclude by saying that the enthusiastic participation of the nine district attorneys remains the linchpin of our program. I am committed to continuing to work closely with the district attorneys and the task forces to make a real difference in the lives of the citizens in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania.